



American Visual Guru Shapes Indian Newspapers

By GIRIRAJ AGARWAL

From overhauling the look of *The Hindu* to introducing color to the U.S. edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, Mario Garcia is redefining the world of newspaper design.

What is common to *The Hindu*, *Mint*, *Mid Day*, *Malayala Manorama*, *Hindustan Times*, *Sakaal Times*, *Business Line*, *Sakshi*, *The Week*, *Sportstar* and *India & Global Affairs*? The look and layout of these 11 Indian publications were created or redone by American newspaper designer Mario R. Garcia.

"For most Indian publications what was missing is some type of visual discipline," says Garcia, an immigrant from Cuba who is based in Tampa, Florida. "Each section editor had the freedom to lay out his or her pages based on individual choices and

preferences....My job has been to bring in consistency."

Garcia also chose to use a lot of colors. "India is full of colors...the array of colors in the sarees the women wear, the colorful buses....This should be visible in its publications."

He has spent more than 30 years designing publications all over the world and has collaborated with more than 450 news organizations, besides writing several books on the subject.

Garcia's association with India began with a short stint for the *Hindustan Times* in 2000. The designing of *Mint* and

redesigning of *The Hindu* are among his favorite Indian experiences. "Programs were followed from start to finish with the results that you can see on the pages of these newspapers daily," he says.

For *The Hindu* he had a clear brief from the publishers. The design had to give the paper a contemporary look to attract young readers and yet keep the classic touch that is dear to its older, loyal readers. "The *Hindu* design is all about the purity and functionalism of design at work. The typography is based on two main fonts, Interstate and Chronicle, which render an elegance and clarity to the product," says Garcia. He

chose soft pastel tones “to go with the content of a paper for which credibility, sobriety and intelligent reporting are the key.”

Garcia designed *Mint* from scratch, and the financial daily is one of his favorites. “*Mint* is the trailblazer with its sparkling Berliner format....It was interesting to create the print and online look at the same time.” The Berliner format is narrower and shorter than the broadsheet format.

One of Garcia’s most high profile assignments was the redesign of *The Wall Street Journal* in 2002. It was the first major overhaul of the look of the paper’s front page since 1941. It had never used color in its U.S. editions as the publishers

that sense, he finds some Indian newspapers 20 years behind. “Many Indian newspapers still operate without a design director. The publishers do not feel the need to hire and pay a high level art director,” he says, adding that Indian publishers and editors need to recognize the importance of visual journalism, especially infographics.

So what were Indian publishers looking for when they hired Garcia and why did he get priority over Indian designers? N. Ram, editor in chief of *The Hindu*, says, “This was not a sudden decision. Mario simply can’t be compared with Indian designers who do not have that experience. He has a whole concept, a clear

design philosophy. He is so comprehensive. He takes briefs, listens to people and gives options....He does not accept anything unless it satisfies him.”

Ram says *The Hindu* has changed for the better after the redesign and 95 percent of readers are happy with the new look. “There is more consistency, better navigation, better use of pictures and clear hierarchy of stories,” he says.

He also feels the editorial staff needs to be more disciplined with respect to basic design principles but agrees that when it is not possible for editors to follow a particular design guideline, their decisions should have priority. “We should know

guidelines? “Ultimately, it is up to the editor to sign off on the design and Mario’s work is never about his own ego,” says Narisetti, who thinks *Mint*’s innovative design helped it succeed in the key markets of New Delhi and Mumbai.

Garcia travels more than a million miles annually and no matter where he is, likes to go for a run every morning. At 60, he often says that if it’s not a good running city, he does not take a project. He brings his camera along and takes pictures of how different cities wake up. In fact, Garcia got the idea of using a coin as the dot of the ‘i’ in *Mint*, when he picked up a battered, old Indian coin during a morning

of his adopted country. It was at Miami High that he savored the “giant victory” of reading an English book cover to cover and also his “first journalistic scribbling, in halted English” for the school newspaper, *Miami High Times*.

Garcia worked as a journalism professor and publications adviser at his alma mater, Miami Dade College. He went on to teach graphic arts at Syracuse University’s Newhouse School of Public Communication (1976-1985) and the University of South Florida (1985-1991). He also founded the graphics and design program at the Poynter Institute of Media Studies in Florida.

For more information:

Garcia Media

<http://garciamedia.com/>

What works and what doesn’t in newspaper design

http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/pages/resources/2004/03/what_works_and_what_doesnt_in/

Universal Newspaper Design Myths, Debunked

http://www.poynter.org/dg.lts/id.4091/content.content_view.htm

papers with an Indian designer in a matter of weeks for less than Rs. 20,000.

Mehta also raises the question of who should have the final say in design elements in a publication. “Designers have no magic wand. They need to be expertly guided by an editorial team. If you let designers run riot, they will produce a title which could win a design award but will be probably a publishing disaster,” says Mehta.

An editor should be able to visualize a page and have a say in the layout because “everything goes under his or her name,” says C. Jayanti, senior editor with the *Financial Express*. “Indians tend to be individualistic, which creates problems, so the design person will want to have the last say. That sort of thing must be resisted.”

Anita Singh, design editor for the Hindi *Hindustan* feels there is no dearth of design talent in India but they need to have international exposure to adapt themselves to the changing times. Regarding the designers versus editors debate, she says, “A newspaper or a magazine is a team product...and editors and designers both need to understand each other.”

Omkareshwar Pandey, executive editor of *The Sunday Indian* (Hindi), feels there is no harm in inviting designers from outside India because talent knows no boundaries. He adds that while editors and designers need to be liberal enough to listen to each other, “in an editor-driven industry, the editor is finally responsible for everything that goes in the publication.”

What is Garcia’s reaction to this debate? “The reporter is the chief architect of the storytelling process,” but designers also need to have journalistic skills, he says. “I believe in the marriage of writing, editing and design.”



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Far left: Mario Garcia (right) works with colleague Jan Kny on the redesign of The Hindu.

Left: Some of the Indian publications designed by Garcia Media.

felt that would diminish the gravitas for which the paper was known. “First introducing color to the U.S. editions and converting the European and Asian editions from broadsheet to compact, the experience was exhilarating, challenging, and to this day the one project that will always define me,” says Garcia.

Financial dailies do not specialize in printing the best photography, so Garcia’s design team had to deal with type and charts. “It was a challenge to make sure that we preserved the traditions and good elements of the original *WSJ*, while allowing ourselves to introduce the newspaper to strategies that work for today’s readers,” says Garcia.

He believes a modern newspaper cannot function properly without a visual sheriff to supervise how the content is presented. In

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—N. Ram
Editor in chief, *The Hindu*

when to put Garcia handcuffs in place and when they should be taken off,” says Ram, explaining that some adjustments were made in implementing Garcia’s guidelines when editorial staff had difficulty, such as in adjusting the size of the main picture.

Raju Narisetti, editor of *Mint*, had worked with Garcia previously in Europe and briefly in the United States. “He is an ideal design consultant in the sense that he always starts by asking what the paper is or wants to be all about. He also is willing to work very closely—in fact he demands it—with the top editorial team, so there is common understanding all the way. This is really crucial, since design is not just about giving some templates for the news team,” says Narisetti.

Was there any conflict of views between the editorial and design team on layout

run. Garcia loves “chicken tandoori, the variety of teas, the flowers and fruit” in India and rates the Kerala backwaters as his favorite place in the country.

He began traveling at the age of 14, when his parents put him on a plane for Miami, Florida, in February 1962, a few months before the Cuban Missile Crisis, because they wanted him to “grow up in a free country,” he wrote in a letter published in *USA Today* in 2000. His parents promised to join him in a month, but it was two years before they could come to the United States, where he was living with an aunt and uncle. A child actor in Cuba, Garcia went to school and junior college in Miami. He writes poignantly about Miami High in his blog and how it represents his “first smell, taste and feel”

Despite Garcia’s phenomenal success, not everyone is buying his ideas. G. Krishnan, a senior editorial consultant with experience in American and Indian news media, feels many of his design features do not suit Indian papers. “The requirement of navigational boxes is of no use in Indian papers, which are no more than 24 pages (for the main section), unlike the 100-page units that are printed abroad,” he says.

Then there are editors who think India already has many designers who understand Indian readers better. Vinod Mehta, editor in chief of *Outlook*, wrote in his Delhi Diary column in June, “Dr. Garcia is without a doubt a world-class professional, but he is costly, very costly.” Mehta added that he designed three news-